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ABSTRACT

Children today come to school with problems that are markedly different from those of only a generation ago. Because school is such a large part of a child's life, the school experience is a highly significant factor in the child's life-stress situation. Unfortunately, many of the current practices in the school, far from helping children to cope, actually serve to exacerbate the stress situation. This paper deals with the "fit" of child with school, as seen in the context of childhood stress and children's emotional well-being. The proper use of psychology in the schools is discussed, and some recommendations for structural change are made so that teachers can rely on the educational system to help them, and not act as an impediment, as they work to foster children's emotional development. (Author)

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ED 414 528

Stress and the School Experience*

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It has been said that, for the first time in our history, we are in danger of producing a generation of children who are less educated than their parents. Parents and a growing number of educators are well aware of this dismal trend. There are many factors that contribute to the widespread underachievement that critics have called the "dumbing down" of our schoolchildren. It is true that in many schools social promotion has replaced competency based advancement, and students are graduating without the skills required of them. But it is unfair to blame the schools, as if they alone were responsible for this failure.

Rapid social change with profound implications for the raising of children contributes significantly to the problem. Still, in many cases, the schools exacerbate the problems children face. Rather than serving to ameliorate the effects of rapid social change, or to remain benignly indifferent to those forces, today's schools have adopted practices that further contribute to the problem --violating the physician's first rule: "do no harm".

Today's children come to school with problems that are markedly different from those of only a generation ago. Because school is such a large part of a child's life, the school experience is a highly significant factor in the child's life-stress situation. Unfortunately, many of the current practices in the school, far from helping children to cope, actually serve to intensify the stress. This paper deals with the "fit" of child with school, as seen in the context of childhood stress and children's emotional well-being. It advocates creating school as a place that helps children cope with stress.

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Part I: Children and Their Parents

A New Type of "Troubled" Child

Over the past generation there have been sweeping changes in American life, changes which have profound implications for children and their families, and for the future of our society. The implications of those changes are seen by those who work with children on the front lines: teachers, counselors, social workers, mental health specialists, juvenile justice officials, and child care workers. Increasingly, professionals involved with children have seen a different kind of child being referred for services.[1]

In the past, intervention services have been designed to meet the needs of children who were seen traditionally as high-risk children: the disadvantaged; seriously troubled, emotionally disturbed youth; and handicapped children, for example. But within a generation we have seen a new phenomenon rise up. A different type of child is showing up in increasing numbers among those being referred to counselors, and child guidance clinics. These are children who do not fit the traditional profile of "at-risk" youth, yet they are clearly having difficulty meeting the demands of learning and of growing up in today's society.

Not surprisingly, the first signs of warning have come from our schools. What do we find when today's children enter school? Probably for the first time in their young lives they are called upon to perform "academically" in an expected way, and to do so with some consistency. They are required to practice newly-emerging skills in a relatively structured manner following a planned sequence which is meant to yield predictable results.

School is a demanding experience. It calls upon the child to work, to attend with some consistency, and to marshal his or her resources, in sustained concentrated effort. Developmental psychologists talk about the early years as time in which are built the pre-academic skills which will be so important to sustain the child through school and later throughout a lifetime of learning.

But what we are finding today are increasing numbers of children who are having difficulties developing those very skills. This is often most visibly seen in problems in attention, which are manifested by children with limited attention spans who have difficulty concentrating. In recent years, there has been increased professional attention given to children with attention problems and a diagnostic entity labeled as "Attention Deficit Disorder" has found its way into the school's vernacular. Within a decade or so since this term was introduced, the number of children so diagnosed has risen exponentially, to the point where it has become the most prevalent psychiatric disorder of childhood.[2] It continues to be one of the most popular diagnosis to be assigned to children showing problems in school, and it has been estimated that it may account for as many as 30 to 50 percent of the referrals to child guidance and mental health clinics.[3]

As children progress through school, these fundamental weaknesses begin to have a more direct effect on academic learning, and if the problem becomes more apparent later, it is likely to be characterized as a "reading problem" or "problems in math". By second or third grade, the academic deficits may be so apparent that parents and teachers begin to question whether the child may have a "learning disability", that is whether there may be some neuropsycholgical problems in early development which might account for the poor academic performance being seen in the child's schoolwork. Thus we see the number of children identified as leaning disabled continue to grow, as even more children are granted tutorial instruction, supplemental help, remedial work, or other special education.[4]

What has emerged as the schools struggle to cope with large numbers of children with learning problems, is a plethora of special programs. Many of these interventions are "pull-out" in nature, wherein the child is taken from the classroom to be given more one-on-one attention, or more small group work; while such programs may have some benefits, they also serve to further fractionate the school day.[5]

Even with educational intervention the school performance of such children remains marginal. While their performance may merit poor grades, given today's climate of grade inflation such children are likely to be passed along from one grade to the next. Since these children are obviously having troubles, they are even less likely than their peers to be challenged academically, and concern with harming their "self-esteem" will make them ideal candidates for adaptive or compensatory grading. Minimally involved in learning, these children eventually will graduate, sometimes barely literate, often poorly equipped --as amply shown by achievement test scores.

This is a generation of children who are experimenting with drugs and sex at increasingly earlier ages, and in such record numbers that some alarmed school officials have called it epidemic. They are overwhelming the juvenile justice system. They are running away from home, and they are committing suicide in record numbers. And they are both the perpetrators, and the victims of violence in the schools.[6]

The increasing number of children in trouble has been well-documented, with some studies suggesting that as many as one out five children may have significant adjustment problems. As more and more "average" children began to show behavior in school that was regarded as a sign of a troubled child only 20 years ago, it became obvious that it was necessary to move beyond the psychology of the individual child, to take a wider psycho-social perspective.

The Disappearance of Childhood

The social changes we have seen in recent years have contributed to what Neil Postman of New York University[7] has called the "disappearance of childhood". Professor Postman reminds us that "childhood", from a historical perspective, is a recent phenomenon. Ours is a Romantic view, inspired by philosophers like Rousseau and Locke, who urged parents to raise their children more naturally, fostering affectionate ties between parent and child.

In such a view, parents were clearly seen as very special adults, those who assumed the archetypal roles of nurturing, providing for, and protecting their young. For the child, the role of mother and father became invested with a constellation of meaning. And parents were given, in the child's eyes, almost magical powers. They, as adults, were the ones in charge, capable of bringing order out of chaos, of righting life's wrongs, and controlling the forces which, if left unchecked, might threaten to overwhelm the child. Thus, children were encouraged to see their parents as naturally protective and helping.

Childhood was to be a time of innocence, of playfulness, of imagination and discovery; a time of life sheltered from the harsher cares and responsibilities of making a living. Children, dependent on their parents, had to recognize their authority (and by extension, that of other adults such as teachers). They were taught to defer to their elders, to be obedient, respectful and affectionate. They were to look upon adults, even strangers, as helpful and supportive. Adults could be trusted; they could be relied upon to help. And from this underlying sense of trust, established early on between parent and child, the groundwork would be laid for later psychological well-being.[8]

Postman has aptly described the period from 1850 to 1950 as the "highwatermark" of childhood. And the writer Vance Packard[9], an acute observer of social trends, echoed that sentiment. Reflecting on the many changes taking place in the family, he summed up the situation this way:

During the century leading up to 1965 Americans generally experienced a pattern of family living combining affection and discipline and community-centered living that was congenial for the development of most of their children...To me it seems that our society is seriously malfunctioning in its role of preparing children for adulthood. The upheaval and disarray we are seeing in childrearing patterns are unprecedented in modern times.

There were many factors that led to the disappearance of childhood. Postman places much of the blame on the newly emerging power and persuasiveness of the mass media. But if the information age helped to destroy childhood, it was only one of a number of forces that made a contribution towards that precipitous erosion.

Children in A Culture of Narcissism

It was among the protest generation of the Vietnam war era that the human potential movement was born. The goal was self-fulfillment; the promise, unparalleled personal freedom. But the primacy of the self brought with a rationale for human selfishness, creating what Christopher Lasch[10] has called the "Culture of Narcissism", -- a culture that would ultimately have damaging effects on children.

From these changing attitudes flowed sweeping changes in social behavior and customs. There was a precipitous rise in divorce rates, in cohabitation, in unwed motherhood, in single-parent families, in abortions, and in the numbers of working mothers. Such changes eroded the nuclear family, introducing instability and widespread disruption into the lives of children.[11 12 13]

It was a time when less formalized styles of relationships, like co-habitation, gained wider acceptance. It seemed now possible to form loose alliances, ones that permitted men and women to "do their own thing" without the normal confines of marriage. Such relationships have the fragile quality of temporary arrangements, easily entered into and easily dissolved. While that quality makes them very appealing to many adults, it is potentially devastating to children. Now children were exposed to shifting arrangements of various adults who once would have assumed the crucial and primal roles of "mother" and "father". Teachers are seeing more of the children of such partnerships in their classrooms, children who come to school from increasingly disruptive and sometimes chaotic family situations. Research has shown[14] that children in single-parent families and step-families are at greater risk for emotional problems and academic difficulties than those from intact, mother-father families. Confused, uncertain, insecure, and feeling inadequate, such children are not capable of meeting the demands of school.

Changing Parental Roles

And what of those parental roles themselves? They too, are changing. The traditional notions of the mother as nurturer, the father as provider and protector, were being rapidly undermined. In the father's case, the notion of paternal authority came under attack. To some extent, this was part of the general thread of protest that ran through those turbulent times in the aftermath of the Vietnam war. In this excess of revolutionary zeal, all authority, including parental authority, was called into question. The effects of this breakdown in adult authority (for both parents and teachers) were predictable.

It was the father's role that was more explicitly called into question by certain feminists who deprecated the contribution of the male in the context of the family. While there are few generalizations that can be drawn about children growing up within single-parent families, it does seem that both fathers and mothers contribute something to the development of their children, and the absence of one or the other may have some effect.

For example, there is research[15] to suggest that boys growing up without a father seem to have problems in sex roles, sexual identity, development, school performance, psychosocial adjustment, and in the control of aggression. Similarly, research shows that girls left fatherless by death or divorce, show precocious sexual behavior and disruptions in heterosexual behavior, especially in adolescence.[16]

At the same time, the feminist critique of the role of women in our society, began to question traditional notions of motherhood. One of the most radical changes that we have not come to grips with involves the huge increase in working mothers over the last 20 years. David Elkind[17], a professor of child psychology at Tufts University, has written about this important development and the resulting role conflicts it has created for women. He noted that today, after almost two decades of the feminist movement: "...a middle-class woman who chooses the life of a housewife is often regarded as unambitious (and therefore less intelligent than her working counterparts) and generally lacking in self-respect and female pride." As a result many young mothers find themselves under stress by the conflict between staying home with their children, and being "liberated " by taking a job.

Because of role conflicts, career concerns, economic considerations, or self-image ambivalence, many young women, confronting the biological facts of motherhood, seek to minimize its effects on their careers. As a result the "time out" from the career to give birth has shrunk, and the practice of using increasingly early day care services has become a modern phenomenon, the effects of which, both short term and long term, are only poorly understood.

Abdicating Parents

But along with these sweeping changes in behavior, an even more profound change in attitudes towards children began to emerge. Even in the best of circumstances children require sacrifice, and impose limits on the personal freedom of the parents. Traditionally much of this sacrifice has been born by the mother. Fortunately, there are counterbalancing forces, innate tendencies to nurture and protect the young, which grow into love and genuine affection between parent and child. But it is a delicate balance between the love parents have for their offspring and the resentment and repressed hostility children are likely to engender. What happens when powerful social trends begin to tip this delicate balance?

What happens when the individual is led to believe that sacrifice should no longer be tolerated as a necessary part of raising children? If that is the case then children who interfere with personal self-fulfillment become expendable. Essentially, this line of reasoning holds in defiance of conventional wisdom, that it is possible to have one's cake and eat it, too. The sad result may be that many of today's parents, consciously or unconsciously, buy into this notion, and simply opt out of parenthood, choosing not to be involved in the lives of their children.

Parents who opt out of parenthood may have made a conscious decision to do so, but it is also likely that they have simply become overwhelmed with the task of raising children, especially if the entire burden has fallen on a single parent who is also employed. Caught between competing values, they take the course of least resistance, and let the mantle of responsibility slip from their shoulders.

Raising Children Today

Raising children today often seems to be an overwhelming task, especially when there are so many competing demands on one's time. Professor Elkind describes the contemporary parent as living in a "pressure cooker" of competing demands, role changes, and personal and professional uncertainties. There simply is little surplus time and energy left over for the child, and "quality time" cannot make up for the fact that time and energy used in work, and in managing the various demands of an active life, leave little for the child.

Single-parent and dual career families have also contributed to the decline in care, attention and supervision given to children. Where once parents supervised children very closely, even to the age of adolescent rebellion and beyond, that is no longer the case for many of today's children. Because of uncaring or simply overextended parents, they find themselves left largely to their own resources; the traditional parental supports of nurturance and protection are unavailable to them. The proportion of those children who have to take care of themselves after school, the so called "latch key kids" is a modern phenomenon that is on the increase. According to a recent Harris poll, 51 percent of teachers single out "children who are left on their own after school" as the primary explanation for student's difficulties in class.[18] Latch-key kids, with all their attendant risks, provide the clearest, and most obvious example of diminishing child care and supervision by parents.

Children today live in a fast-paced world, where instant gratification has become expected and any delay of gratification seems intolerable. They grow up on MTV, sound bites and short bursts of visual images which condition them to shortened attention spans. In a world that is constantly changing, living lives that feel the effects of dislocation, and upheaval, of hurried schedules, and fragmented contacts with various adults, many children are left confused, uncertain, and tentative about life. Lacking self-confidence, they are ill-prepared for the rigors of school.

In today's climate, instead of their protection, parents offer information to their children. Children must learn survival skills: how to operate the microwave, or how to avoid suspicious strangers. They are dropped off at Karate classes so they can learn to defend themselves in a world that they will come to see increasingly as hostile, a world view that their parents and the media often reinforce. "The world is a dangerous place", they will hear again and again. And the media will provide a steady diet of examples to reinforce their fears. It is a world where the Kindergarten teacher can't be trusted, where adults are lurking to prey on little children. And so they are taught self-defense. They

are taught to fear AIDS, even as they may have only the vaguest notion of what sex is all about.

Those parents who lack a genuine commitment to parenthood hold back, and this tentativeness is interpreted by the child as a deprivation of love. The parent is seen as uncaring, and the child feels very much abandoned, left to fend for himself in the world without the protection of the parent.

Along with the abdication of parenthood has come an abdication of parental authority. As we have seen, the widespread resentment of authority which marked the last few decades spread from government to the military, the police, the colleges and schools, and finally to the last bastion of authority over the young, the parents. Like the school authorities who, finding themselves under fire, quickly retreated, there were parents who, to one degree or another, found themselves co-opted by the youth rebellion. With authority eroding all around them, it was difficult to stand firm, and the traditional parental injunction "you must do it because I am your parent, and I told you to" no longer seemed to work very well. Some reacted by re-asserting their traditional authority, some by seeking compromises, others by total capitulation, eagerly embracing the youth movement, even as educational authorities were doing.

The Democratic Family

The latter scenario had much to recommend it. It offered a position that was conveniently rationalized as contributing towards the goal of a more "democratic" family.

This new democratic family was one in which children were seen as individuals, with their own needs, and capable of "doing their own thing". As a result children were brought into family matters as though they were on equal status with the adults. They were now privy to family discussions of matters such as the family's financial status, and their opinions sought on issues from which, a generation ago, they would have been excluded.

Giving children a greater say in the choices that affected their lives also meant that the responsibility for consequences was diluted, and another potentially burdensome responsibility lifted from the parents. Of course, forcing children to make decisions for which they are ill-equipped brings with it a different set of problems, but those were only indirect and could easily be ignored. This dynamic led to further abdication of the parents of their traditional roles, and parents lured by the heady promises of personal freedom which marked the times, were not always reluctant to abandon their parental responsibilities.

Children today are made aware of many potentially emotionally-laden issues from which they were kept blissfully ignorant only a few decades ago. Adult concerns such as the state of the environment, the fate of whales, and a host of social-political causes have become a part of children's lives. And so we see on our evening news shows the pictures

of children pressed into service, marching on some crusade with a placard of protest painted by their parents.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the premature initiation into sex, as children are made aware of sexually-transmitted disease, birth control, child sexual abuse, and homosexuality, issues which, in the past, they would have been expected to come to know about as adults.

They were also encouraged to make their own choices at increasingly earlier ages: what they would eat, what they would wear, and what they would do or not do around the house, and what rules might be reasonably obeyed. The justification for abandoning parental authority is rationalized by a positive concern, that of developing independence in the children. By letting the child on his own, by encouraging him to make his own decisions, allowing him to take the initiative, one could develop a more self-reliant, self-initiating child, one who would be more independent as an adult.

Doctor Theodore Million, a scholar whose work has influenced our understanding of personality and psychopathology, was writing of these many changes being introduced to the lives of children when he said:

Few times in history have so many children faced the tasks of life without the aid of acceptable and durable traditions. Not only does the strain of making choices among discordant standards and goals beset them at every turn, but these competing beliefs and divergent demands prevent them from developing either internal stability or external consistency.[19]

The Hurried Child

Under the banner of fostering independence, parents have, in effect, deprived their children of childhood as we have come to know it. David Elkind has documented the new kind of child in his book *The Hurried Child*.[20] Elkind paints a masterful portrait of a child upon whom a pseudo-maturity has been urged by adults.

Elkind maintains that, for a variety of reasons, it is in the modern parents' interest to hurry children to grow up, thus relieving themselves of the burden of at least one set of worries and anxieties, and perhaps even enlisting the child's aid in carrying life's load. As a result we see children who are dressed like adults, often in designer clothes, talking like adults, and behaving like adults. The media does much to support this view, often portraying children as precocious, manipulative, and sexually aware, using adult language and adult strategies in interpersonal situations. In this way the media fosters a pseudo-sophistication. Writes Elkind:

Children today know much more than they understand. They are able to talk about nuclear fission, tube worms at 20,000 fathoms, and space shuttles; and they seem knowledgeable about sex, violence, and crime. But much of this knowledge is largely

verbal. Adults, however, are often taken in by this pseudosophistication and treat children as if they were as knowledgeable as they sound.

The point is that while it may be possible to foster adult behavior and mannerisms in children, the development of feelings and emotions have their own timing, and these cannot be hurried. Not allowed to be a child, the hurried child is forced to face an adult reality for which he is not emotionally prepared.

Elkind responds to the view that children are being discriminated against if they are denied equal status with adults, a peculiarly modern notion. In his response, he reflects the view of many experts in child development:

Children need time to grow, to learn, to develop. To treat them differently from adults is not to discriminate against them but rather to recognize their special estate...Children do not learn, think or feel in the same ways as adults. To ignore these differences, to treat children as adults, is really not democratic or egalitarian.

Do we Know How to Raise Children?

There is a rich legacy of information on child development. As a result, we well know what children need to thrive and gain a measure of psychological well-being. Child psychology, formulated and influenced by such scholars as Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Erik Erikson, John Bowlby, Harry Harlow, Margaret Mahler, and Rene Spitz, has given us the means of understanding children and appreciating the marvelous invention that is childhood. Childhood allows gradual growth. It is a time of wonder, of learning, of discovery. It is a time when we are permitted and even encouraged to use our imagination in ways that will find little expression in adult life.

Childhood also provides the opportunity to create the notions of *love* and of *trust* in interpersonal relations. The love bond between parent and child serves as the model for adult loving relationships. Research in child psychology has amply demonstrated the crucial importance of the early loving attachments formed between parent and child.[21] [22] It might be said that the love bond between parent and child is a necessary prerequisite for the child's mental health and emotional well-being.[23] And developing in children a sense of trust is essential if they are find the underlying security and stability that will allow them to venture forth with confidence, to grow and to explore and to learn.

But what of today's children, those "hurried" children, who are deprived of the nurturance and protection of their parents? What of those children who have experienced only transient, temporary bonds with various parental figures in their lives? What of the children of dual career families where competing interests leave parents unable or unwilling to make a primary commitment to their children? For them this lack of love gives rise to a feeling of injury, a sense of void, the filling of which becomes a lifelong,

and ultimately futile, pursuit. It may result in a bitterness and loneliness as the child turns inward in increasing self-centeredness.

Is it unreasonable to expect such children to fail to develop trust in their relations with others? Would such children not see the world as a selfish place, one where love is withheld, and commitments only tentative and exploitative? Viewing the world with intense suspicion, they will be condemned to repeating a pattern of growing isolation and selfishness in their own lives.

Selma Fraiberg,[24] an expert in early childhood at the University of Michigan, has written a valuable book in which she has pointed to the results of not establishing the crucial love bonds: the clinical consequences for the individual, and the far-reaching consequences for society. These are children whom Fraiberg sees as suffering from what she has called the "diseases of non-attachment", a condition characterized by the person's incapacity to form human bonds. As adults, some find their ways into mental institutions or prisons, but many more remain anonymous, making up one of the "largest aberrant populations in the world today". They are people who are unable to fulfill the most ordinary human obligations in work and in love. These are the "hollow men", men and women without desire and potency. Lacking a conscience, and with characteristic indifference, these bondless men and women are more likely to act violently and destructively and bring increasing social disorder.

E. James Anthony[25], a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, who has written extensively on the stresses placed on today's children, has pointed out the tremendous consequences for the future. These are, he reminds us, the next generation of parents--a generation whose own experience with being parents has been derived from role models who showed a lack of love for their own children. He warns that:

> *It may be that in our-rearing methods we are raising children who no longer care to raise children. ... one of the major risks to children of this century in the Western world where material aspects are well taken care of, is the ambivalence of adults. This is the large psychological hammer hanging over the heads of children..."*

Part II: Our Schools

The Kind of Schools Our Children Need

Given the unique set of stressors with which today's children have to cope, we need to examine the "fit" of child with school. First of all, we need to have schools that are dedicated to their primary mission of teaching the academic core, while being designed to help support today's child. Anything that distracts from the schools' proper role, is just that -- a distraction. Academic time has been stolen to make room for a host of non-academic activities as the schools have been called upon to: eliminate poverty, achieve racial balance, fight drug abuse, address nutrition and health needs, reduce prejudice, see to children's self-esteem and emotional well-being, and prevent AIDS, unwanted pregnancy, and youth suicide. It is simply unrealistic to ask the schools to take on such formidable social tasks. Teachers and principals should be required to address *educational* issues, not unmet social needs. Misusing any institution forces it to stray from its fundamental mission. In the case of the schools, misuse strains the ability of teachers and administrators to remain focused on the primary task of meeting the educational needs of their students.

School can become one life situation that helps children cope with stress, and they do this, not by deliberate attempts to "psychologize" the curriculum, but indirectly by, in the first instance doing their primary job well. If schools will focus on the business of teaching academic skills, they will find that there is considerable pay-off for the children in terms of their emotional development. From the school experience children can gain: a greater sense of security and self-confidence, a sense of the importance for individual achievement, inner motivation, a work ethic, self-discipline, and respect for authority and responsible social behavior. These are the qualities that will help them succeed in life, and contribute to a civilized society.

For children who may come from disrupted homes or disjointed families, it may be especially important to provide them with a place that fosters security. Studies of children of divorce have demonstrated that they show better coping and academic work in schools that are structured and stable. For such children school is a refuge, a safe place where they should be able to find shelter which will allow them, to grow. Children who are anxious because of disruptive lives outside of school have trouble attending and staying focused on the task at hand. Given the needs of today's children, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Establish school as a safe, quiet, orderly place to learn. The classroom environment may hinder, or facilitate, learning. Creating a place that is quiet, orderly and structured, helps to reduce stress, lessens anxiety, and allows children to free up energy that can be more appropriately devoted to learning. From a predictable, secure environment children

can venture forth more confidently to explore and meet new challenges, and to become actively engaged in learning.

2. Help children to attend by structuring their environment. For younger children especially some attention should be given to their sense of space. An assigned seat, clearly labeled, for example, helps the child to structure things. Careful attention given to seating arrangements might also be used to limit social interactions and direct the child's attention towards the teacher (and away from peers). To help children attend and focus, teachers can provide them with external aids to help organize their work.

3. Make the school day predictable with a regular schedule. Minimize disruptions. A predictable environment reduces stress that comes from confronting the unknown. A predictable school day with a regular routine provides a sense of continuity and is useful in taking some of the ambiguity and uncertainty out of children's lives. Thus teachers should plan each school day - so far as possible - to follow a schedule. Displaying the schedule prominently on a chalkboard or on a wall chart reinforces its familiar pattern.

4. Establish the teacher as an authority figure. Do nothing to distract from the respect that should be accorded the teacher by virtue of his or her position. Teachers, like parents, are powerful symbols of adult authority for children. They set limits. They mediate and interpret the world for children. In the process they foster the children's emotional development helping them to find ways to cope with stress.

5. Establish and consistently enforce classroom rules. Children and adults perceive limits from two quite different perspectives. While adults may resent the imposition of limits as an affront to personal freedom, children find that physical and psychological limits make the world more manageable, more secure, more understandable. Limits help children develop self-control. The ultimate goal is to help children develop inner controls; therefore, external controls in the form of classroom rules are an important first step. Such rules should be kept to a minimum, clearly stated, and consistently enforced. Posted reminders of the classroom rules provide visual reinforcements.

6. Establish a discipline policy. Discipline imposed by adults is the first step in children's development of self-discipline. Therefore, teachers should develop reasonable, clearly stated disciplinary policies. Punishment should be applied fairly, immediately, in proportion to the offense, and without recrimination. Children should always see the possibility of making a fresh start. To help children learn responsible behavior, teachers should reinforce the concept that behavior always carries consequences. The message, "If you do X. then Y will follow," points out the consequences in a non-threatening way. It renders predictable the reactions of others to specific behaviors. It reduces the ambiguity surrounding adult expectations. Simultaneously, it suggests to children ways in which they might modify their behavior to meet those expectations.

7. Separate school from home. The two places should be distinct parts of the child's world, each with its own set of expectations. Unlike the home, school is a place where

formal learning takes place; children in school need to learn to a different set of skills. They need to apply themselves, to consciously attend, and concentrate.

8. Do not subject children to adult concerns and social problems which they are ill-equipped to confront. While there are social problems and concerns, it is always a mistake to force children to directly confront them. The view of the world as a troubling place, filled with threats, -- a view fed by television, is one which will exacerbate insecurity. Children must be given the impression that adults are in charge, and can generally be trusted to do the right thing. They will have to confront adult reality so enough, in the meantime -- let children be children.

9. Set clear expectations for academic performance. Unrealistic and vague expectations can be a source of considerable stress to children. Therefore, teachers should help youngsters and their parents to set realistic academic goals. Classroom experience gives teachers a ready frame of reference against which to judge an individual child's academic progress. Therefore, teachers are well equipped to help both youngsters and their parents in setting levels of expectation that challenge, but do not overwhelm, children. But to do so, the teacher must be allowed to render fair and honest judgments, and not be restrained by administrative or parental pressure to be less than honest.

10. Be honest in evaluating academic performance. Although success may not always come easily, lessons should be carefully structured so that it never is completely beyond the grasp of children. While it is true that children's feelings of competence are closely tied to their perceptions of their academic progress, being overly concerned with damaging children's self-esteem is foolhardy. At best, creating artificial success is disingenuous. The child will only be temporarily fooled, if at all. Telling a child he is doing well, when he clearly is not, serves only to reinforce the notion that adults cannot be trusted; they will lie to you when it is expedient to do so. The bond of trust between adult and child is thus once more weakened. Just as children must learn to take pride in their strengths, they must also come to terms with their limits -- it's a normal part of growing up. Knowing one's academic status and understanding the expectations of significant adults reduces the stress that ambiguity can induce. Teachers' characterizations of children's progress should be both sympathetic and realistic.

Psychology in the Schools

Applied psychology has long influenced educational practice. But while there are many facets of education that might benefit from insights gained through psychological theory and research, it was psychology's psychotherapeutic promise that held considerable appeal for progressive educators. Psychology was to be transplanted from the clinic or the therapist's office to the schools to be enlisted in educating the "whole child" in both individual (such as in child testing and counseling) and in group applications (such as in sensitivity training).

A child may be referred for psychological testing when that child is suspected of having developmental or adjustment problems which might interfere with learning. Parental consent is routinely solicited for such assessments, and a qualified psychologist is required to carry out the examination. Judiciously applied, psychological testing can be useful in identifying problems and providing recommendations for teachers and parents on how to best manage the situation. Like all interventions, it is a procedure that can be abused, inappropriately applied, and always open to the temptation to be over-used.

Counseling in the schools has expanded from its more traditional role of limited application in the high schools, (i.e., guidance counseling), to concerning itself with children's mental health at all levels. Counseling is based on certain psychotherapeutic principles thought to be effective with adults. Although they are modified for children, it is not clear just how effective counseling with children can be. Moreover, in those limited cases where there is a some basis to believe that a child's emotional problems might respond well to counseling, it does not necessarily follow that it is the school's obligation to provide such counseling. Counseling in the schools, like psychological testing, always runs the risk of being inappropriately applied through overuse.

When psychological services are too widely applied, there is a very real danger of creating or exacerbating problems by calling undue attention to them, singling out the child for special education services, and labeling the extra attention that is given as "psychological" in nature. This is not to say that there aren't times when psychological intervention is necessary, only that it must be very conservatively applied. Over-use is an especially common error made in today's schools, where teachers and administrators are trained to be alert for any signs of adjustment problems on the part of their students. They are warned that early intervention and prevention are much to be preferred over later psychological treatment. While that proposition seems intuitively obvious, the value of early "prevention" in the case of psychological problems has been largely oversold.

The notion of early intervention to prevent problems from fully developing comes to the mental health arena from medicine where there are those who strongly believe in the value of taking steps early on to assure good health. But medicine is more advanced as a science than psychology, and those factors which might predict physical health are much better understood, (although even in medicine there remains some disagreement about role and nature of many of the identified "disposing factors" of illness). Psychological research has suggested that there are some factors which affect later mental health, with the evidence more persuasive in some cases than in others. In light of our limited understanding of the long terms effects of psychosocial contributors, it makes sense to be very cautious in and to guard against applying the notion of prevention too broadly.

This over-concern with the child's psychological development can be counterproductive. The dangers of identifying a problem too early are well known in

psychological lore, and the husband and wife team of Bruce and Martha Johns, have correctly pointed to the problems in the schools in their aptly-titled book for parents: *Give Your Child a Chance.*[26] Being too quick to intervene, to apply diagnostic labels, even though those labels might help to qualify the child for special services, can often be a mistake. This problem has been exacerbated by today's political climate where, by accrording the child group membership with others who may have a problem (i.e, an Attention Deficit Disorder), brings on victim status and mandated "help". The issue of falsely identifying a problem where one may not actually exist, and then reinforcing the notion of the child as one in need of help, can cause the child and the parents undue distress. Rather, psychology should be used judiciously and wisely, and only when other means of intervention have not been successful.

Unfortunately, the notion of early intervention is one that has a distinct appeal to educators. They rush to embrace a wide range of programs billed as "preventative". Such programs are often poorly grounded in psychological principles which they espouse, yet packaged so as to assure teachers and parents that something is being done to meet some perceived social need. For example, programs to prevent unwanted teen pregnancy, have proliferated in the schools, as have programs to prevent drug use. Many of these programs remain unproven. Introducing a program whose effectiveness has not been proven may or may not be a bad idea, depending on other factors (i.e, costs, use of limited resources, scheduling, etc). However, when a "psychological" program is introduced there are a number of not always obvious implications. Again caution is urged; the place of such programs in the schools should be carefully considered before buying into them wholesale.

Similarly, the schools current obsession with self-esteem, demands critical examination. Self-esteem is a concept upon which there is little agreement among psychologists. Educators, undeterred by the lack of a widely accepted definition of the concept, seem determined to plow ahead and "increase self-esteem" as though it were a measurable and determined quantity (like gasoline for our cars) of which we all could presumably benefit from having more. As a result, they are likely to adopt programs billed to strengthen children's self -esteem which are of questionable validity. Many of those programs are at best dubious as to the desired results, and moreover, like all psychological interventions, they carry certain negative implications. Perhaps a better way to proceed would be to concentrate on building children's sense of competency indirectly, by carefully structuring and monitoring academic progress. As a child experiences genuine academic success demonstrated in the classroom, he or she will develop an increasing sense of mastery, and the self-confidence that follows will become a valuable asset in the years to come.

Children are not adults. They don't experience the world in the same way as adults. They do not have the same repertoire of emotions upon which they can draw, and they lack the developed language to describe those emotions. Moreover, they lack adult powers of self-reflection and introspection, two key qualities necessary for psychotherapy. These are obvious facts, but in today's climate there is often a need to

state the obvious. Programs designed for adults do not transfer directly to children. For example, there have been a number of techniques developed for adults to use in stress reduction. These have been used with varying degrees of success, although there is little agreement among researchers as to the efficacy of these techniques especially in the ability to provide long term sustainable help.

What happens when we apply such techniques, albeit in a necessarily modified form, to children? What happens when we attempt to raise children's "consciousness" of their emotional state in a direct attempt to help them learn to control their feelings? At what age should we attempt this? The implications of performing such exercises in the classroom, have not been fully explored but here too, we should urge extreme caution. Such preventative programs are of dubious value, and the justification for including them in the school curriculum is questionable.

Although psychology as applied to the classroom may have some justification in the case of the individual child who is showing signs of behavioral maladjustment, the application of psychology-derived techniques to whole groups of children is seldom justified. It is more likely that the true value of psychology as a therapeutic aid would lie in its indirect application. For example, creating a proper learning environment would introduce into the children's lives, many of the elements which, although not guarantees, are at least prerequisites for good mental health. Such an environment will be helpful for *all* children, including those with adjustment problems.

Parents and Parent Involvement

The crucial link between parents and schooling was recently recalled by James Coleman in his book on private and Catholic schools.[27] Coleman points out that public schools see themselves as agents of society and thus might well find themselves at odds with parents. Private schools, on the other hand, represent an orientation that sees the school not as an agent of society but as an agent of the family, with authority vested *in loco parentis*. This difference in attitude is crucial for understanding what school authorities mean by "parent involvement" in the schools.

While denying that there are fundamental problems with the system, the schools are implicitly recognizing that they are in trouble by their calls for help. They vaguely speak of something called "community support", and increasingly we hear the plea for greater "parent involvement". Unfortunately, it seems all too often the case that when the schools turn to parents, it is usually because of problems they are encountering, i.e., seeking help to manage difficult conduct or discipline problems that arise in school. School authorities loudly champion the cause of parent involvement, but the degree of parental involvement is carefully limited, except when the schools are having a hard time.

Parent involvement is a complex issue. Increasingly, school authorities have taken what many perceive to be an elitist attitude toward education, disdaining parent suggestions, even when they have been solicited under the banner of greater involvement.

As a result, growing numbers of parents are skeptical and increasingly cynical about their schools. Genuine parent involvement must be built on trust, and when one party or the other has betrayed that trust, it takes time and a sustained effort to re-build it before a true partnership can once again be established between parents and the schools.

Parents can betray the trust by abdicating parental responsibilities, by withdrawing their legitimate interest in their child's education and by ignoring (and thus by leaving to the schools by default) their child's ethical, moral, social and emotional development. The schools can betray that trust by being less than honest with parents, by ignoring their pleas on educational matters, by not communicating with them (except in times of crisis), and by disingenuous reporting practices. Both parties can weaken that trust by not establishing and maintaining some degree of ongoing communication.

But even prior to establishing the trust bond there is a more fundamental issue at work here, and it goes to the heart of many educational problems, that is, a blurring of the legitimate roles of parents and schools. There is an implicit contract between parents and schools; each party has a role to fulfill. It is the primary responsibility of the schools to transmit knowledge; the primary responsibility of the parents is to provide nurtrance and protection to their child, to see to their child's well-being, ethical, social and emotional development. When either party breaks the contract and crosses the boundaries, the situation can quickly become unhealthy.

Increasingly, parents are tempted to cross the boundaries when they see their schools failing to educate their children. In their anxiety over their child's schooling, they may become overinvolved with their child's school experience, so that mother or father begins to take on the role of tutor, or surrogate teacher, a development that is usually not a healthy one. In the most extreme case we find parents turning to home schooling which, while perfectly understandable in those instances where parents have, in exasperation, given up on the schools to do their proper job, is nonetheless not the best situation.

Schools are also tempted to cross those boundaries, often with the best of intentions. The factors which cause the schools to cross the line are many and some of these have been discussed previously. There is often a genuine concern for children's emotional well-being and the schools make the logical case that unless a child is relatively free of emotional problems, he cannot be expected to put maximum effort into learning. While this hypothesis seems intuitively obvious, it does not follow that it is up to the *schools* provide psychotherapeutic services. In similar way, there are legitimate concerns about the ethical and moral behavior among our young people. The leap from identifying that concern to proposing that the schools be used as instruments to see to moral education, is one that should not be made without a great deal of soul-searching.

We have an extensive body of knowledge in social learning that shows that our most profound and deeply held attitudes are formed in early childhood with our parents providing the models. In some ways schools may help to re-reinforce lessons learned at home, but in the ideal situation, they should not try to substitute for the lessons to be

learned from our parents. Of course, there are many sad instances where parent support is lacking and so the schools efforts can be seen as a poor, albeit well-intentioned, substitute.

Unfortunately, there are many other cases where parent support or adequacy is not an issue, and still the schools act as though it were their mandate to intrude on the territory traditionally reserved for parents and the home. Motivated by social activism, schools sometimes violate the boundaries, as in those instances when parents' rights to consent to their child's participation in special programs are abrogated.

A blurring of the boundaries is always dangerous. The ideal situation is a genuine partnership between parents and schools. Schools need parents to underlie and reinforce teacher authority, to help to maintain discipline in increasingly difficult times, to show their child that they value education, to support and motivate their child to put forth the best possible effort in school. Parents needs schools to provide education, to teach their child the essential knowledge he or she will need to become responsible, productive citizens. The destruction of the bond of trust between parents and the schools is detrimental to both.

It is a difficult time for parents. We are living in times of rapid technological and social change, and the resulting stress is felt by parents well as their children. Anyone who has worked with parents and their children for any length of time cannot help but be sympathetic to the difficult job it is to raise children in today's climate.

If sweeping social change has placed stress on families, and men and women are finding it difficult to cope, what then can be done to help them and their children? The first step should be a realistic recognition of the problem. If there is a greater ambivalence today because of tensions between careers and children, some reflection about one's personal values would seem to be very important. Value guides our choices in life, sometimes suggesting the sacrifice of more immediate pleasures for future gain, based on what we see as important. Personal reflection about those things which are most important to us seems an important first step in guiding life's decisions.

Secondly, if rapid social changes have been made the child's world more unsettled, every attempt should be made to provide continuity and a more stable, consistent, and predictable environment at home and in school. Parents who can keep regular schedules and set aside some special time for their child, will be doing much to help. When things become disruptive, a child's need for attention often grows stronger. Making the time to provide personal, individual attention, to show that parents care and are interested, is very important.

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Title: Stress and the School Experience

Abstract: Children today come to school with problems that are markedly different from those of only a generation ago. Because school is such a large part of a child's life, the school experience is a highly significant factor in the child's life-stress situation. Unfortunately, many of the current practices in the school, far from helping children to cope, actually serve to exacerbate the stress situation. This paper deals with the "fit" of child with school, as seen in the context of childhood stress and children's emotional well-being. The proper use of psychology in the schools is discussed, and some recommendations for structural change are made so that teachers can rely on the educational system to help them, and not act as an impediment, as they work to foster children's emotional development.

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